

Love (with Help) In Marin

Mother-daughter team directs fate with Cupid's arrow

By Somer Flaherty



Photo by Photo by Tim Porter

Face it: if you're looking to pair up, being single in Marin is hard. The local dating scene often feels more like a convent (sorry, Sister) than a town overflowing with successful, athletic singles (like yourself). Those college friends who used to set you up are now wrangling sippy cups, dirty diapers and

carpool schedules. Dating sites like Match.com and eHarmony.com boast of success, but who really wants to spend hour after hour sifting through page after page of profiles looking for Mr. or Ms. Right?

If lately your quest for someone to share the rest of your life with (or at least an enjoyable night out) is feeling more like a dead-end job, it may be time to break out the checkbook and try the high-priced yentas of Marin.

For a fee — sometimes up to six figures — Sausalito's mother-daughter matchmaking company

Kelleher & Associates will dip into their Rolodex of thousands of eligible prospects. Their roster contains hundreds of Marin names, but with 10 offices stationed around the world — including Beverly Hills, New York, Scottsdale, Stockholm and London — they can also do an international search of singles, complete with ads in high-end glossies targeted to your specified demographic.

Although founder Jill Kelleher, who started the company in Greenbrae almost 20 years ago, calls the firm “the best-kept secret in Marin,” Kelleher & Associates has received national television coverage from 20/20 and Entertainment Tonight, along with mentions in magazines like Us Weekly, Star and OK!—no small feat for a business in which discretion is the watchword and referrals can be limited. (Satisfied customers may not want others to know their match made in heaven was in fact a pairing produced by conscious efforts here on earth.)

Kelleher knows she’s made a good match when the client stops calling her. “I don’t even get invited to some of the weddings,” she says. Kelleher’s daughter, Amber Kelleher-Andrews, chief executive officer of the company, recalls a prospective client who was hesitant to use their services because he didn’t think they could find him a high-caliber woman like his best friend’s wife. “What he didn’t realize, and we couldn’t tell him because of confidentiality,” says Kelleher-Andrews, “was that his best friend had found his wife using our services but his best friend hadn’t told him.”

Kelleher’s friend and makeup artist Pam Nichols laughs at the story. “[They’ve] probably been responsible for 75 percent of the weddings in Marin,” she says. (The company has had a hand in more than 400 weddings, all told, Kelleher estimates).

“Yes,” says Kelleher-Andrews, who lives with her husband and three children in San Geronimo, “basically everyone in Marin has been with us at one point or another — and no one knows.”

OK, let’s chalk that comment up to exuberant hyperbole, but it’s not an exaggeration to say these two are passionate about their work. “It’s all about a personal approach,” Kelleher-Andrews says. “Our clients, they’re friends of ours. There’s no number attached to them. We have the credibility and the best reputation and because of that, when people ask us who our competition is we say we have none.”

None of this may have happened for the Kellehers had it not been for a chance job in the early ’80s. Jill Kelleher was working as a photographer at a well-known but not as high-end dating service. The outgoing blonde still smiles as she remembers the day her boss asked all the employees to visualize and write out exactly what they wanted in life. Kelleher didn’t have to think long.

She scribbled down her answer: a black Jaguar convertible she had seen in the parking lot and a dream house with views of the water. Years later Kelleher signed up her first client , a Greenbrae lawyer. “At our initial meeting he wrote me a check on the spot,” she says. Today, Kelleher is still signing up lawyers — and neurosurgeons and professional athletes and supermodels. She has her Strawberry home overlooking Richardson Bay, a Jag in the garage and a long-term relationship.

But what drives successful, good-looking and felony-free singles to in some cases pay the price of a luxury car for a one-and-a-half-year matchmaking membership? Sometimes it’s just the opportunity for a few fun dates — with the hope it leads to lifelong happiness.

A decade ago opportunity knocked for Debra Hall when the former Kelleher client received a phone call from Jill. “She said, ‘I’ve got a guy for you and he’s the one,’” recalls Hall. Ten years later, the Tiburon resident is still married, and although she notes there are no guarantees with the Kelleher service, she has nothing but praise. “I would have never met him if it weren’t for Jill. We were in two different environments with different friends; our paths would have never crossed. It’s like the Lotto: if you don’t play you don’t win; but if you do play you can win pretty big. You’re not going to meet anyone staying at home and that’s the bottom line.” Happily married (she refers to her relationship as a fairy tale), Hall says her husband is the nicest, kindest, smartest guy—and adorable.

And while the definition of a fairy tale can vary, Kelleher does have standards a prospective client must meet. Almost all the males on the company roster have advanced academic degrees or have been vocationally successful on their own, and the female clients range from creative types like writers, designers and those in marketing to notable figures in the community or well-heeled divorcées.

Still, an Ivy League diploma or a lofty pedigree won’t guarantee a spot on Kelleher’s list. And the firm doesn’t accept alcoholics, drug users, smokers and overweight candidates because “they’re just too hard to match,” says Kelleher.

For those who do make it past the gauntlet of pre-interviews and background checks, the road to mated bliss can nonetheless have many forks. At Kelleher & Associates, it starts with a screening of potential partners according to the client’s specifications.

Some of these are very specific indeed. One recent male client, an avid golfer, “refused to be set up with a woman who didn’t have a handicap under 17,” Kelleher recalls.

After the screening, introductions are made and continue for 18 months if necessary (if a match works out, the membership can be put on hold). The Kellehers fine-tune the search as they glean more information about a client’s nature and preferences.

Being discreet — and a good businesswoman — Kelleher won’t disclose much about their pool of A-lister clients. But if the whispers are even half right, the list proves the notion of dating services as recourse for the desperately single is passé. It’s been reported that Jennifer Aniston, Paula Abdul and at least three billionaires have used Kelleher’s services. Is it true? Kelleher’s answer is hidden somewhere behind her engaging smile and bright blue eyes.

Good luck guessing the identities of the Marin most-eligibles they serve, either; you’d have better odds at the tables in Vegas. You’ll need to be satisfied with the tantalizing morsels Kelleher hands out: an architect who enjoys spending time on his sailboat, bike riding and relaxing at his second home on Martha’s Vineyard; a tall and handsome Mill Valley surgeon, wine collector and fan of the symphony who’s looking forward to having a family; a midthirties Kentfield real estate developer who likes snowboarding in Squaw, playing tennis, and traveling to Cabo San Lucas; and a rock climber (and Marin Catholic grad) whose home is in San Anselmo but who has lived and worked in Europe and Asia.

It’s enough to make any mother (or happily married best friend) drool.